



Coming of Age

O

ne of the great perks I looked forward to when

I turned sixteen was being able to give up my paper route

and get a regular job. Paper routes are okay, but for a

young, timid kid who was afraid to ask for money, it often

proved to be a non-profit operation. At age sixteen, I could

get a social security number, which meant that I could go

get myself a real job.

BY RAY MORGAN

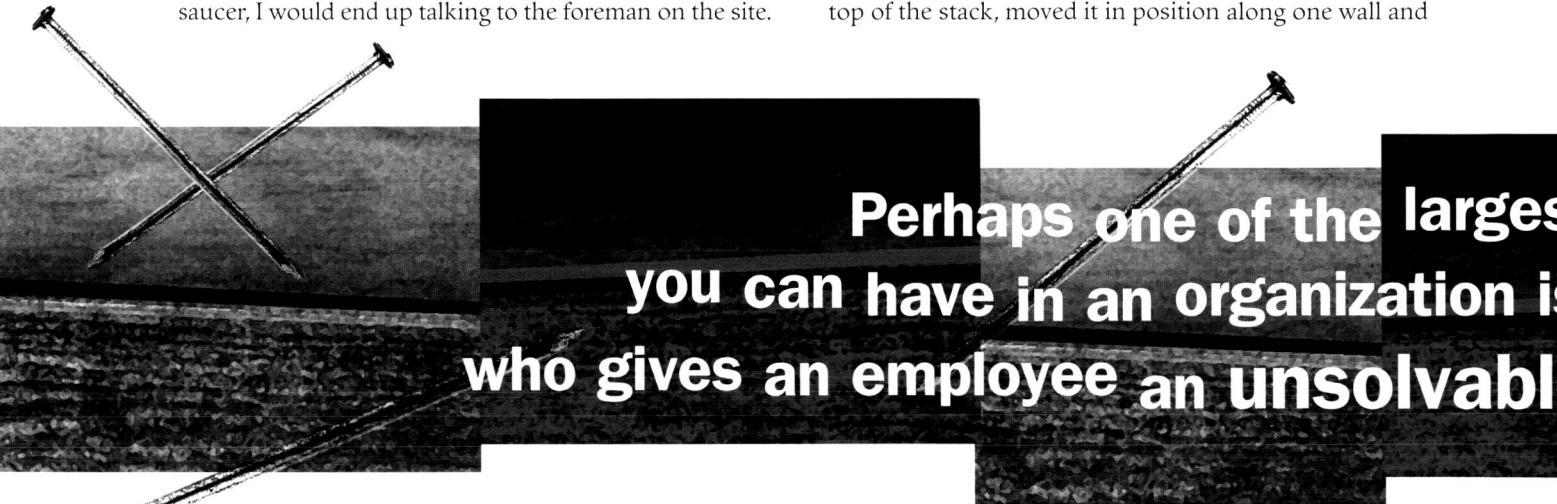
THE FIRST DAY OF SUMMER VACATION THAT YEAR, I RETIRED from the paper route that had been in my family for nearly a decade (passed down brother to brother) and I became a free agent. I had always wanted to be a carpenter. I don't know if it was because I just liked the idea of working with wood, or if the ability to use noisy, masculine tools like a hammer and a power saw just made me feel more like a man, but, at sixteen, I saw carpentry as the ultimate job.

I didn't have much of a plan, so I simply drove around to different construction sites that I found on the outskirts of Greensboro, North Carolina. I would walk around the site, telling whoever I saw I was looking for a job, and eventually, just like an alien is always directed to the leader of a country after deplaning from his flying saucer, I would end up talking to the foreman on the site.

floors, and cleaned out corners where "other carpenters" had taken a pee—with only occasional chances to work with anyone who actually made things from wood.

One morning, I was finally given a chance to advance my skills. O.J. needed someone to put down the plywood under-flooring for linoleum that was to be laid in a kitchen and dining room. O.J. was not given to wasting words or time. He told me to bring my tools (by this time I had acquired a hammer, a nail set, and a screwdriver) and follow him to another house in a nearby development, where O.J. gave me my first taste of on-the-job training.

In the house, we found a stack of A-D grade, $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch fir plywood, along with a box of 8-penny, cement-coated nails. O.J. slid a sheet of plywood off the top of the stack, moved it in position along one wall and



Perhaps one of the largest you can have in an organization is who gives an employee an unsolvable

In North Carolina at that time, there were no construction unions; hence, almost anyone who owned a hammer and a screwdriver could call himself a carpenter and have a fair chance of getting hired. Minimum wage was \$1.25 an hour; most "unknown" workers, however, started even lower. One Mr. O.J. Wray decided to take a chance and hired me at \$1.10 an hour to work as a finish carpenter's helper. I actually didn't even own a hammer at that point.

When O.J. told me my job title, at first I imagined working alongside a journeyman carpenter as his apprentice, and learning the skills of the ages. (Why, I bet by the end of the summer I would probably know enough to build my own house! My mom would be very proud.) What I found out, though, was that a helper basically was assigned to do hard or dirty jobs others didn't want.

Initially, I cleared out leftovers from inside the house and piled them in scrap heaps, swept dust from the

sank nails every four inches around the edge and every eight inches through the middle, permanently bonding it to the 1-by-4 fir sub-flooring. I was amazed how he rarely took more than two blows of the hammer to drive a nail, one to set and one to sink, with no apparent effort. When he had me do it, I took about ten hits with the hammer for each nail.

After taking a little time out to ridicule my hammer technique, O.J. took a look at the pile of plywood, noticing that the good, or "A," side of the next piece was up and that the "D" side (with all the knotholes) was down. He gave me explicit instructions: "Take that plywood off the stack just as it sits—do NOT turn it over."

O.J. left me there alone to finish laying the kitchen and dining area that morning, before lunch. Although it bothered me when I saw that many of the sheets had knotholes showing on the top, I was desperate to prove I could do a good job, just as I had been told, and I wasn't

about to turn one of the sheets over and get chewed out for it. I assumed that O.J. knew something about the wood that I couldn't comprehend, and that the holes in the top didn't really matter once the matting and linoleum were laid over them.

To avoid the ugly part of this story, just let me say that it took me three days to get up what only took me three hours to put down. I learned a great respect for cement-coated nails. Using a crowbar, each sheet of the fir plywood came up in small pieces, and most of the nails had to be pulled out separately.

What made it worse for me, though, was the shame and unfairness. O.J. had come back late in the day to see what I had done. He assumed that I had ignored his instructions about turning the plywood over, and he never deigned to speak to me directly again. Instead, he

morale breakers a manager problem.

talked about me to the other carpenters, ridiculing my skills and intelligence.

The other carpenters, of course, wouldn't believe my protests about doing just as I had been instructed; they simply smiled and shook their heads when I tried to explain. I ached for the chance to explain myself to O.J., but he never even acknowledged my presence after that event. The humiliation was so bad, the next rainy day I left and went looking for another job.

O.J. made several mistakes. Obviously, he failed to explain to me his goal, or aim, of creating a perfectly smooth surface for the linoleum, so that holes and gaps would not show through the flooring later on. Secondly, he wrongly assumed that all the "A" sides of the plywood faced up. Old O.J. jumped to the conclusion that because the first three sheets of the stack had the "A", or

smooth side, up, that all the rest of the sheets shared the same orientation. In fact, they did not; most of them had the "D" side up, with lots of voids where knotholes had fallen out.

But an overarching mistake, and one that was a little less visible (but more endemic throughout the business and government world) was that he "over-constrained" the problem. Left to my own intelligence, even without telling me to put the smooth side up, I would have flipped over the plywood that was upside down, just because it looked bad to me. But, because he constrained me with explicit directions not to turn the plywood over, and because I had no direct access to him to challenge this constraint when it became a problem, I was unable to solve the problem using my own brain.

I have seen this situation of over-constraining a problem by absent decision makers, preventing its solution, played out over and over in many organizations. To me, this is a form of delegating responsibility without authority. This paradox is also a predominant source of stress at work, and is perhaps one of the largest morale breakers you can have in an organization: a manager who gives an employee an unsolvable problem.

In my early days of running a division and having my own employees, I'm sad to say that I emulated that behavior more than once. At the time, I rationalized it. Now, I know how wrong I was, and how I may have ruined the morale of employees who only wanted to do good work. I recognize that almost every time I didn't get what I wanted from an employee, it was because they didn't understand what I really expected from them, they didn't understand how to provide it, or there were constraints placed on them that stopped them from doing a good job.

I am sure O.J. is long dead and gone. He wasn't young when I worked for him. I think he would have been amazed to learn what a long-lasting effect his behavior that week in 1963 had on me. •



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